

## IMPROVING BASIC EDUCATION: HEARING THE SILENCED VOICES OF TEACHERS IN BRAZIL

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### Abstract

This article aimed at providing an overview of the findings of a joint research project of several Swiss and Brazilians institutions on Brazilian basic education. In Brazil, teaching is governed by the Law of Directives and Foundations of National Education (LDB) stipulating that Brazilian schooling has a compulsory length of nine years of teaching. To measure the progress in basic education of the nation as a whole the Basic Education Development index was created by the Brazilian Education Minister. The measurement results showed that quantitative development of schooling in Brazil needs to go hand in hand with a concern regarding the quality of education. Besides, analysis indicated necessity of taking into account structural factors along with the contributions of fundamental participants, especially teachers. Several teachers' opinions concerning with current situation were gained. *First*, in dealing with their profession, Brazilian teachers considered that they were lack of social recognition, had incomplete training, and earned insufficient salary. *Second*, concerning with school, there were distant school-family relations; political-pedagogical project was too far removed from the day-to-day; accountability was especially at the administrative level. *Third*, in connection with class, situations covered solitude of the teachers, many teachers had given up, and social and familial difficulties of the students.

**Key words:** Basic education, teacher, hearing the silence voices

### **Basic education in Brazil: What has been done and what remains to be done**

In the last few years the question of basic education has taken an important position in educational policies and debates. The notion of basic education incorporates the idea

that children need to acquire basic literacy knowledge (reading, writing, arithmetic, etc.) by attending school for several years. Basic education targets both the learning of skills used in daily life and preparing for the possible continuation of schooling in secondary education as well as socializing children

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in a common setting that transcends sociocultural differences.

On the international level, the World Conference on Education for All in Jomtien, Thailand, in 1990, and the World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal, in 2000, were not isolated events but underlined the international community's desire to insure education for all the world's children. The most recent UNESCO report on Education for All discussed key developments since 2000. It shows that the number of pupils attending primary school throughout the world increased from 647 million students in 1999 to 688 million in 2005. The largest increase was 36% in sub-Saharan Africa and 22% in Southern and Western Asia. Consequently, the number of non-schooled children has decreased, and this decrease has accelerated since 2002. Furthermore, the net school enrollment total has gone from 83% to 87% from 1999 to 2005, and this was a quicker progression than the one recorded from 1991 to 1999 (UNESCO, 2007).

On the national Brazilian level, basic education has shown important progress in the past decades. Teaching in the country is governed by the Law of Directives and Foundations of National Education (LDB)<sup>3</sup>. The latest version of this law is from 1996 and stipulates that Brazilian schooling has a compulsory length of nine years of teaching labeled "fundamental" and has as its objective basic citizen education.

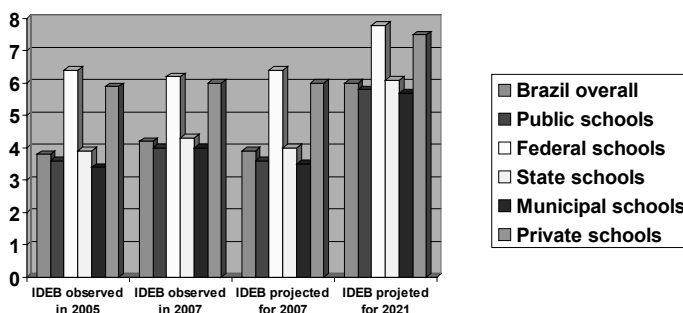
The basic education development index (Índice de Desenvolvimento da Educação Básica) (IDEB) was created by the Brazilian Education Minister to measure the progress in basic education of the nation as a whole, of the federate states and of the municipalities. This statistical index combines two parts: (a) indicators of student fluctuation (rates of schooling, of remaining in and dropping out of the school system), (b) indicators of student results on standardized tests taken throughout their school careers. This index is on a scale from zero to ten, with a six being the level of basic education achieved by developing countries according to international surveys.

Figure 1 shows the observed and projected index for 2005 through 2021 for the first four primary grades (children aged seven to ten). A clear improvement can be seen from 2005 and 2007, especially in the municipal schools and those of the federate states. On the other hand, one can see the long road ahead in order to achieve the objectives for 2021. Furthermore, roughly 20% of the municipal schools failed to achieve the projected IDEB for 2007 (INEP, 2008). These schools are concentrated in the poorest regions of the country.

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3 Lei nº 9.394, de 20 de dezembro de 1996

Figure 1  
Observed and projected index of the development of basic education in Brazil 2005 - 2021 (First four grades of primary school)



Source: INEP (2008)

Regional differences can be seen in Table 1. Among the states where we conducted research, three have an IDEB above the national average: Sao Paulo, Minas Gerais and Goiás, while two are below the national average: Amazonas and Bahia.

**Table 1**  
**The evolution of IDEB between 2005 and 2007 in the Brazilian states under study**

	IDEB 2005	IDEB 2007
Brazil	3,8	4,2
Paraná	4,6	5,0
São Paulo	4,7	4,9
Minas Gerais	4,7	4,7
Goiás	4,1	4,3
Amazonas	3,1	3,6
Bahia	2,7	3,4

Source: INEP (2008)

Furthermore, an analysis of illiteracy in Brazil shows how much work remains in order to improve the

performance of the education system. Figure 2 shows that the southern and southwestern regions are going in a positive direction. Other regions, particularly the northwest, are lagging behind in terms of basic education results.

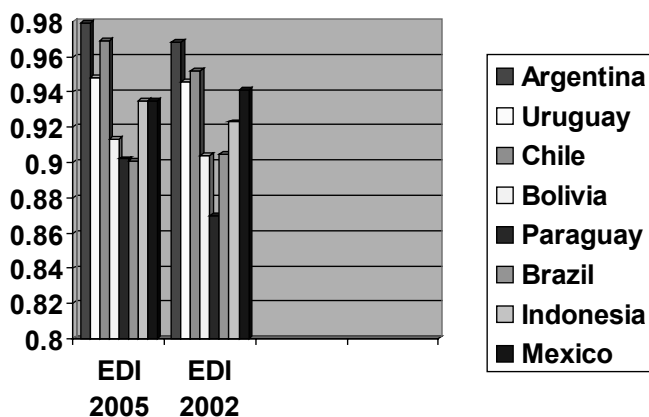
With close to 95% of all children currently enrolled in primary schools, the challenge facing Brazilian education has to do more with quality than quantity (PREAL, 2005; UNICEF, 2006). It also has to do with having basic education of comparable quality to that of its closest neighbors who are partners in Mercosul or in comparison with emerging countries experiencing similar economic development. Figure 3 shows the Education for All Development Index (EDI) for Brazil in an international comparison. This composite index is used by UNESCO, ranges from 0 to 1 and is based on pertinent indicators which are combined in a straightforward calculation: universal primary schooling, adult

literacy, sexual parity and education quality. The closer the EDI is to one the better the results in Education for All. We notice that Brazil is the only country where the EDI decreased slightly

between 2002 and 2005. Moreover, the Brazilian index is much lower than that of economically comparable countries such as Argentina, Chile, Mexico and Indonesia.

**Figure 3**

**Brazilian basic education in international comparison**



Source: UNESCO (2005), UNESCO (2007)

Taken as a whole, the data given in the first part of this article show that the quantitative development of schooling in Brazil needs to go hand in hand with a concern regarding the quality of the education.

## 2. What is meant by quality in basic education

It would seem important to define the meaning of quality when referring to basic education. Several dimensions can be brought up when defining basic education quality in a given context. First, it is clear that “quantity” precedes

“quality” in education. Put differently, all education systems currently recognized for the quality of the education they provide began by greatly increasing access to schooling (i.e., increasing the quantity of individuals who attend school). The history of contemporary formal schooling began, even in Western Europe and North America, with overcrowded classes and an exponential expansion of school enrollment. It is not unrealistic to think that the current quantitative progress being made in Brazil will not turn out to be qualitatively efficient in the near future.

However, a risky international trend has ended up making it that education quality is solely measurable by educational indicators or standards based on quantitative data of the school system and student achievement. At the international level the PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) study by the OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and development) is an example of this problem of measuring quality by exclusive quantitative indicators. Several national evaluations (Prova Brasil, Saeb, Enem) have taken place in the past few years in Brazil. Nevertheless, these studies stop short of documenting the intrinsic and extrinsic characteristics that impact the quality of basic education.

At the same time as recognizing the importance of such quantitative indicators in evaluating basic education, it would seem that the quality of basic education is mainly linked to the meaning that students and teachers to learning and of the future perspectives that they open up. Many factors that are not taken into account with quantitative indicators need to be examined in order to better understand how to achieve quality in basic education. First of all it would be necessary to know if the students are gaining knowledge that is seen as useful for their local community and for the continuation of their schooling. It would also be necessary to know if they have an obvious pleasure in attending school or if they feel that while necessary school is mainly a chore.

Another important limitation of international comparative education research is that it homogenizes outcomes for a country sometimes obscuring disparities within a country. For example, it is not necessary to do a great deal of educational research to see that the quality of basic teaching in Brazil is not the same if one compares municipal or state schools to private ones. Similarly, when looking at regional inequalities, the children of the north and the northwest do not receive a quality of education that compares with the one received by children in the south or south-west. Additionally, children belonging to the Afro-Brazilian community and of diverse indigenous communities do not receive an education that can be compared to the national average. Finally, and this is the point that interests us the most for the remainder of the article, a quality education is not possible without a motivated, well-paid teaching body that has received an adequate training and is socially recognized for its educational mission.

In the final analysis, basic education is a collection of processes and results which are qualitatively determined. The *quantity* of children attending school is certainly a fundamental but insufficient condition to improve basic education.

(3) The necessity of listening to teachers

In this section we report opinions which are rarely taken into account in educational research and in public

policy regarding basic education: those of teachers. Our research team carried out over 45 semi-directive interviews lasting forty-five minutes in four Brazilian states<sup>4</sup> (Minas Gerais, São Paulo, Paraná, Goiás) in different types of schools (municipal, state or private) to collect primary school teachers' opinions regarding the quality of the basic education in their schools, their profession and their pedagogical efforts. The interviews took place in the schools and were combined with the gathering of diverse data on the schools and their sociocultural environments from the administrations. We also organized a seminar<sup>5</sup> to discuss the results of the research with the teachers. This study is in progress and additional interviews will be conducted. The following paragraphs contain the most salient elements of the analysis of interviews conducted to date.

**(a) Becoming a primary school teacher: between a vocation and a lack of options**

One of the key moments of the interviews was a discussion regarding the motives and circumstances of choosing the teaching profession. While the traditional vocation of working with children can be found in certain interviews, a lack of options dominated the discussions, especially for teachers coming from rural zones.

*In the first place it was a lack of job opportunities in my home region, where a woman became a teacher or a housewife, I preferred teaching. The school was the only option I had.*

Becoming a primary school teacher in Brazil is seen by the teachers themselves as a choice by default, which does little to improve educational quality.

**(b) The contribution of initial training**

If there is one element that the majority of the teachers we spoke with agree on, it would be the insubstantial contribution of the initial training for their daily teaching. Two major problems are mentioned. The first concerns the over-representation of theory in these classes and the disconnect with real world of teaching. The second touches on the fragmentation of different training elements (classes, seminars, internships...) and the lack of a global coherence. It would be important to note that to become a teacher in Brazil there are two parallel channels. One channel is the "Magistério", a secondary-level training which closely resembles the former "normal schools", which favors the methodological and practical aspects of teaching. The other channel is university-level (*curso de pedagogia*), which consists more of theoretical and professional aspects of teaching. The Brazilian government has recently set the goal of all primary school teachers completing a degree in higher education (Minister of Education, 2006).

4 Interviews are planned for 2009 in the states of Bahia and Manaus which are known for their low quality in basic education.

5 This seminar was organized in order to share our analysis and interpretations of the data with the teachers.

The interviewed teachers were much less critical of the “magistério” than of the university “curso de pedagogia”. Moreover, the teachers who were the least skeptical regarding initial training, in either channel, were those who had worked for several years with no training but who later worked towards a degree. Our research hopes to contribute to the current debate in Brazil regarding the best way to prepare teachers. The university channel of teacher training that is being promoted by the Brazilian government does not seem to have convinced people working in the teaching profession.

### **(c) Desperately seeking social recognition**

The lack of social recognition is an element present in all of the interviews, even though teachers working in private schools feel slightly more appreciated than those working in state or municipal schools. In their professional and personal lives our interview participants feel that their profession stands for suffering, sacrifice and low salary. In other words it is seen as a “profissãozinha” (a diminutive of profession in Portuguese):

*In society teachers really aren't valued. When you're in a group of people having a discussion... No way, you're a teacher? It feels like you're swimming against the current. No way, didn't you have any other job possibilities? Didn't you try to study something else? You must not*

*want any challenges in your life. You didn't try another path but took the easy way, teaching... That's why you took education classes? These classes of looking and waiting for a husband!... I hear this type of talk when I tell people I'm a teacher.*

### **(d) Pedagogical project and teaching methods**

In Brazil there is currently a rather original innovation called “Projeto Político-Pedagógico”. This is a school project generally in the form of a pedagogical orientation text that shows the connection between national or regional educational policies and the life of the school. All of our interview participants underlined the importance of the existence of a pedagogical project in improving the educational quality of a school. However, two major problems have been brought up regarding this innovation. The first has to do with the authorship of the project. The most pertinent projects are those involving the largest number possible of teachers in its drafting. If the project is the solitary creation of a principal or of education managers it will be hard pressed to change very much in an institution or to mobilize a teaching body. The second concerns the operationalization of the “Projeto Político-Pedagógico”. The teachers interviewed said that some projects stay in a drawer in the desk of principals because they are disconnected from the everyday reality of teaching in a classroom.

Regarding the most appropriate teaching methods for quality lessons the interviewed teachers point to the need of diversifying the pedagogical methods. For many, an efficient method is one that can adapt to various classroom contexts, diverse situations of students, and to the subject matter:

*One possible method consists in the teacher being well-prepared and instructing in a systematic way because often the teacher doesn't really have clear objectives, many teachers don't have a precise method to follow, so we need to fix*

*goals. The appropriate method is to take the traditional and to mix it with the modern, make the student think about what he/she is doing... It's also important to diversify the teaching style.*

Findings also reveal the following themes as important improving the quality of basic education in Brazil: higher salaries, school-family relations and a serious commitment by public authorities in favor of public education. Table two looks at the conditions that the interviewed teachers see as necessary for improving basic education.

Table 2  
How Brazilian teachers think basic education can be improved

	<b>Profession</b>	<b>School</b>	<b>Class</b>
<b>Current situation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Lack of social recognition</li> <li>- Incomplete training</li> <li>- Insufficient salary</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Distant school-family relations (inexistent) or parents seeing themselves as clients (in private schools)</li> <li>- Political-pedagogical project too far removed from the day-to-day (top-down)</li> <li>- Accountability (cobrança) especially at the administrative level</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Solitude of the teacher</li> <li>- Many teachers have basically given up (acomodados)</li> <li>- Social and familial difficulties of the students.</li> </ul>
<b>Measures that could improve basic education</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Commitment of public authorities in favor of education</li> <li>- Salary increase will help reducing work overload</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Political-pedagogical project participative and operational.</li> <li>- Accountability especially at the pedagogical level and giving priority to student learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Improving school infrastructure</li> <li>- Diversification of teaching methods (not a single orientation)</li> </ul>

**Conclusion**

The last two decades have seen a public debate in Brazil on the need to improve the quality of basic education. This debate essentially has centered around two points: 1) the legislative measures promoting

the reform of the Brazilian education system which resulted in the passing of the LDB (Lei de Diretrizes e Bases) and (2) the reduction of inequalities connected with the financing of public education which took shape in the launching of two federal aid



programs for basic education (Fundo de Manutenção e Desenvolvimento do Ensino Fundamental e de Valorização do Magistério – Fundef and Fundo de Manutenção e Desenvolvimento da Educação Básica e de Valorização dos Profissionais da Educação – FUNDEB). These funds aim to redistribute resources from the richest regions to the poorest and to introduce financial incentives intended to improve working conditions for the teaching body. These initiatives, for example, force federate states and municipalities to allocate at least 60% of their budget to education and 12% of their total budget to primary education (Neri & Buchmann, 2007).

In the indispensable effort to identify ways to improve basic education, our research project has developed along two lines. In the first place, there is a need for a reconceptualization of educational quality as incorporating both quantitative and qualitative aspects. For a country like Brazil, the goal to strive for is to increase the number of students attending school, especially among the poorest population, at the same time as improving the quality of education that schools offer. In the second place our project has shown the necessity of taking into account structural factors along with the contributions of fundamental participants, especially teachers. In this sense, in spite of the good intentions declared at international conferences and by education ministers, work conditions have continued to deteriorate in many countries. Teachers have been demoralized by their low salaries and

poor working conditions. The necessity of investing more in the teaching body is a high priority if we hope to reach the goal of education for all and to improve the quality of basic education. Being a teacher should no longer mean feeling part of a professional category that sees itself as unheard, subordinate, that sees itself as pawns. The role which has currently been passed on to teachers is seen as being more and more spread out and covers not only the individual development of students but also the transformation of the school establishment into a “community of learners” (OECD, 2005).

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